

# Dog Days of Spring

*As the winter ice thaws, pet retailers that stay abreast of the latest seasonal trends in the dog product category will see their profits grow.*

BY CHARLOTTE REED

Over the past few years, the continuing trend within the pet industry has been the humanization of pets.

This is demonstrated as pet owners continue to lavish attention on their dogs, as if they were children. These pet parents care for their pets in the same way that they care for their family members. They purchase life-stage products, toys, clothing and other items that help them spoil and maintain the longevity of their dogs. In many cases, the purchase of these items is driven by specific seasonal concerns. As humans organize their own lives around the spring, summer, fall and winter months, it stands to reason that they would do the same for their companion animals.

During the months of April and May, don't be surprised if customers are conducting spring-cleaning campaigns. "Just as Americans clean their homes, garages and cars, they clean their pets too," remarks Don Aslett, a cleaning expert and author of *Pet Clean-up Made Easy*.

In recent years, Aslett has noticed that there is a wide array of pet-cleaning products on the market. He attributes this to an increased number of distribution channels, including supermarkets, superstores, pet stores and convenience stores. Aslett also recognizes that there has been a change in the status of pets. "In past years, dogs spent more time or lived outdoors," he says. "Now, our dogs are companion animals, living in our

homes, spending more time with us, and enjoying our company. Although we love our household pets, we spend quite a bit of time cleaning up after them because they can't clean up after

have dealt with this problem. Pet owners have put their pets on diets and have begun to enforce exercise regimens.

Recognizing the demand for weight-management solutions for pets, pet food manufacturers have introduced new low-fat, low-carb or high-protein products that encourage pet owners to monitor their pets' eating habits and weight in order to avoid future health problems. Euro Monitor International, a leading provider of global business intelligence and market analysis, confirmed this in their 2004 pet report. It noted that, "the most prevalent type of value-added benefit



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themselves."

Cleaning up doggie dirt, debris, fur or an occasional accident without harming canines, carpets, floors or furniture has become an important concern for pet owners. According to household expert Heloise, people want to enjoy their pets and their homes without unpleasant odors. "Some of the newer products on the market, the enzymatic cleaners, are extremely useful as they breakdown the odors from urine, vomit and feces," she notes.

## WEIGHT MANAGEMENT

In September 2003, The National Academy of Science reported that dogs in the western world are obese and have similar health risks as people. Canines develop diabetes, heart disease, inflammation of the joints, and other ailments that can lead to premature death. The solution to pet obesity problems is similar to the way humans

was foods formulated for weight loss or weight maintenance in pets." Their data showed that pet owners are willing to spend more money on weight-management food and trade up from mid-priced or economy brands.

Lori Feldman, DVM of the Greenwich Veterinary Hospital in Fairfield County, Connecticut is not surprised. "After a cold sedentary winter, both pet and owner put on a few additional pounds," says Feldman. "In the spring, pet owners know they will be spending more time outside with their pet and they want it to be as healthy as possible. Of course, during the pet's annual spring examination, their owners discuss flea, tick and heartworm prevention, but more clients are asking about weight-loss food and exercise routines." She feels that most of her clients would feel guilty about decreasing the amount of food and treats, and would rather give their pets a low-calorie diet instead.

## PET TRAVEL UNLEASHED

Travel planning begins in the spring, and researchers at Travel Industry Association (TIA) predict the percentage of households traveling with their pets will increase next summer when families take their vacations. According to the TIA, 14 percent of all U.S. adults (approximately 29 million Americans) travel with their pets. Further findings from the poll uncover that traveling pets are owned by people from all socio-economic classes and education levels.

Among adults traveling with pets, dogs are the most common animal brought on road trips. Nearly eight in ten travelers (76 percent) take a trip with Fido in an automobile, truck or recreational vehicle. Statistics like these make it apparent that pets are becoming an important travel group of their own. In recent years, there have been an abundance of hotels catering directly to pets by offering pet menus, beds and other special accommodations.

Patronizing of this sort is not restricted to the hotel industry. "Airlines are also recognizing that people want to travel with pets," says Gayle Martz, president and founder of New York, N.Y.-based Sherpa's Pet Trading Company. In January 2005, Delta Airlines' in-flight magazine, Sky, devoted the entire issue to our endless fascination with the animal kingdom. A month later, both Midwestern and United Airlines introduced frequent flyer programs for pets.

Pet product manufacturers have also embraced this "pets on the go" travel philosophy. Entire lines of travel products, such as collapsible crates, wheeled pet carriers, disposable litter boxes and portable food bowls, have been introduced to address the needs of pet travelers. With the variety of pet travel items available, it has become common for pet stores to offer their customers products that make traveling with pets easier, more fashionable and safer.

## BEAUTY OF THE BEAST

After a long, hard winter, stores should encourage pet owners to give

their pets a much-needed spring makeover by having shampoos, brushes, combs and other grooming products readily available for purchase.

"In today's market, pet grooming products are not necessarily only about cleaning, but making your dog look and feel his best," says Clare Gorman, a New York City groomer. Product lines featuring shampoos, baths and conditioners are helpful to cleanse, condition, soothe and protect dogs' skin and fur.

Over the last several years, dog clothing has become more fashionable and retailers have to keep up with current trends in canine couture. It is important to observe the newest designs, fabrics and colors that emerge on the international catwalks.

Lorraine Podell, owner of New York Dog and Manhattan Mutts, incorporates what's trendy for people into her pet designs. This spring, she encourages storeowners to look for raincoats in lighter-weight fabrics; in lime, lavender, pink and turquoise colors; and in designs that feature scattered polka dots or mod and retro looks. She also predicts that polo shirts will be popular, representing the preppy lifestyle that has come back into fashion.

As pet owners continue to fulfill their need for companionship with animals, they are increasingly willing to spend larger amounts of money to express their love and to care for their pets. By embracing the trends of the spring season, and displaying relevant products in stores, retailers will not only anticipate the wants and desires of their customers, but also produce greater seasonal revenue. **PB**

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